Life Before the Railroads

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It is interesting to speculate on what typical life was like in the Fairbury area before the railroads came to the area. The first settlers in Livingston County were Valentine and Rachel Darnall, who settled about 7 miles south of Fairbury on what is now Indian Creek in 1830.

In 1857, the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to the Indiana border. The village of Fairbury was created on this new railroad. This railroad was later renamed the TP&W (Toledo, Peoria, and Warsaw Railroad).

So our ancestors lived about 27 years in this area before the first railroad came through. In the 1830s, everyone assumed the best spot to build a log cabin was on a creek or a river. In the Fairbury area, this was on Indian Creek or the Vermilion River. A check of every early settler in Avoca, Indian Grove, and Belle Prairie townships found that 100 percent of the early settlers first settled on these waterways.

The average American house built today has over 100,000 parts or components. Each of these components is readily available at a local lumberyard or a big box store like Lowe's, Menards, or Home Depot.

The early settlers in our area had zero access to building components, nails, planed boards, hardware, or glass for windows. Because of this, these pioneer settlers brought the critical tools they needed to build a log cabin with them. These tools included a hand-ax, broad-ax, cross-cut saw, hand saw, auger or drill, adze, draw shave, froe, and two or three iron wedges to split logs. A horse team was also needed to drag logs to the log cabin building site.

The McDowells were one of the first pioneer settlers in the area, and they built their log cabin on the South Fork of the Vermilion River north of Fairbury. They brought some panes of glass with them when they first arrived, but they had no planed boards for the window frames. Per the 1878 Livingston County history book, the boards which furnished the material for the door and window casing of this primitive dwelling were purchased from the Kickapoo Indians and were brought from Oliver's Grove with an ox team. The Indians had hewn them out for some purpose of their own, but were induced to part with them for a small supply of ammunition.

Once the log cabin was built to provide shelter for the pioneer family, the next immediate need was for food and water. They got their water for drinking, cooking, and bathing from the nearby creek or river.

The pioneer settlers also had to be completely self-reliant with respect to their food supply since there were no grocery stores. These early settlers brought some seeds with them to plant their first garden. They often also brought some animals with them, including chickens, hogs, goats, and cows. The chickens provided both eggs and meat.

Fish could be found in the nearby creek or river. The early settlers were blessed to have an abundant amount of wild game available for a meat supply. These animals included deer, wild turkey, pigeons, opossums, ducks, geese, and quail. The deer often traveled in herds of more than 100 animals.

John Johnson was another pioneer settler who came to Rook's Creek, just west of Pontiac, in the 1830s. In the Fall of 1834, John Johnson and his sons killed 75 deer. They transported the deer skins and hams by wagon to Ottawa, where they sold them for $65. This amount is equivalent to $2,015 in today's dollars.

The pioneer settlers had no refrigerators or freezers to preserve their meat. They relied on rubbing the meat with salt or packing it in salt. Salt preserved the meat by absorbing its water, preventing bacteria from growing. All of the salt in that era in Illinois was produced at the Saline Salt Works near Equality, Illinois, in southeastern Illinois. The early settlers likely purchased this salt in Ottawa or Chicago when they took their grain and livestock to these trading centers.

In the 1847 to 1857 era, before the railroads, pioneer settlers in the Fairbury area likely saw Mr. Newman and his peddling wagon once a month. In exchange for his goods, Mr. Newman accepted deer skins, mink skins, ginseng root, feathers, and many other articles.

The farming practices of the pioneer settlers were utterly different from today's large farms. Pioneer farmers needed a way to mill their grain into flour, which could be used to make bread-related food products for the family to consume. The three choices these early farmers had to mill their grain were to take their grain to be milled in Chicago, Ottawa, or Peoria. Since the farmers often had to wait a day or two to get their wagon of grain milled, they did some store trading near the mills and likely bought salt and cloth to make clothing.

Each spring, early farmers needed seed corn to plant the following year's crop. Corn yields in the 1830s and 1840s were about 30 bushels to the acre. These pioneer farmers had to save one bushel of seed corn for every eight acres to be planted the following year.

Farming was a very tough occupation for the early settlers. The land was swampy, and crops often flooded out. There was no easy way to obtain the necessary input supplies for farming, and no convenient method of selling farm outputs for cash. Farming was also very physically demanding. These pioneer farm families often had large families so that children could help with the farming.

The nearest post office was in Bloomington. In 1838, a Post Office was established in Avoca Township in one of the McDowell houses. Indian Grove got a post office in a house in 1846.

Children had very few toys to play with. The father would often whittle or carve simple toys from wood. The mother usually made corn husk dolls for her girls to play with.

A mother in the 1850s making a corn husk doll for her daughter. Image generated by the Perplexity AI (Artificial Intelligence) software.

Because the land around Fairbury was swampy, mosquitoes were very prevalent, and they spread malaria to the pioneer settlers. There were very few physicians in the entire county, and they had no effective drugs to administer to treat diseases. Their chief "stock in trade" consisted of quinine, calomel, castor oil, laudanum, and camphor dissolved in alcohol.

It is estimated that half the children born in Illinois in pioneer days died before reaching five years of age, usually from digestive disorders. A forty-year-old man or woman was considered old.

So in summary, life before the railroads was a very challenging life. Pioneer families had to be very self-reliant because they had few neighbors to help. The arrival of the railroads in the 1850s changed everything. With the railroads, the farmers had a way to get the inputs needed to grow their crops and raise livestock. They also had an easy way to sell their farm products to remote city markets.

It is extremely difficult for us to imagine the lifestyle before the railroads, as most of us grew up with stores where we can buy almost anything we need, well-trained doctors with effective drugs and well-equipped hospitals, and well-trained teachers with well-equipped classrooms. We also live with all the other modern conveniences the pioneers did not have, including refrigerators, electricity, and automobiles.